Porosity and its Discontents: Approaching Naples in Critical Theory

Naples has long been subject to intense cultural and critical interrogation. Since the flourishing of the Grand Tour in the eighteenth century, artists, travelers, poets, journalists, essayists and intellectuals have sought to articulate and make sense of their reactions to a city that has often provoked contradictory responses and been experienced as an assault on the senses. The substantial body of cultural production generated by visitors to Naples is complemented by a rich body of cultural production emerging from within Naples itself, and by the extensive corpus of studies of the city emerging from diverse fields of the social sciences (politics, anthropology, urban studies, criminology, etc.). Of particular importance in relation to the latter is the body of late nineteenth-century work known as *meridionalismo*, which characterized the Italian South – and Naples as its ultimate expression – as an uncivilized and barbaric place, in thrall to poverty and crime and in need of urgent corrective intervention on the part of the more civilized and modern north of the new nation-state.[1] However, while eighteenth- and nineteenth-century representations of Naples have been subject to intense critical scrutiny and detailed historical analysis, their more recent counterparts remain comparatively neglected.[2]

This article addresses a small but highly influential corpus of work within the wider body of twentieth- and twenty-first-century cultural representations of Naples: that of critical theory.

[1] The foundational text of *meridionalismo*, Pasquale Villari's *Lettere meridionali* [*Southern Letters*] (1875), opens with the problem of organised crime in Naples, characterised as a natural and inevitable consequence of depressed economic and social conditions. On the underlying moralism of Villari's writings and its legacy, see Dickie (1999, p. 56) and Moe (2002, pp. 228-36); on the emergence of the moral discourse in the 1860s, see Moe (2002, pp. 170-76). On the ready alignment between Naples and the South as a whole in the minds of nineteenth-century Italians, see Moe (2002, pp. 40-41).

[2] Though individual studies address particular aspects of Neapolitan culture, no comprehensive study of 20th- and 21st-century discourses about and representations of the city exists.

Such work – which is broadly philosophical in nature but provides also the kind of theoretically and empirically engaged analysis more characteristic of cultural critique – is widely cited within the fields of philosophy, cultural studies and urban studies; it is also readily deployed in critical analyses of cultural representations of Naples. Critical theory not only interrogates the city and its culture but, in seeking to provide an explanatory account of the same, also produces a series of images and discourses that – no less than its literary, cinematic or artistic equivalents – constitute cultural representations in their own right. Unlike its more *overtly* cultural counterparts, however, critical theory has evaded systematic scholarly analysis. It has passed uninterrogated into the field of critical analysis of cultural representations of Naples, where it has silently influenced and colored interpretations of Neapolitan culture and cultural production without itself becoming subject to appropriate critical enquiry. Only by studying critical theory as a field of representation in and of itself can we fully understand the premises and assumptions underlying the discourses and constructions that have been so influential in shaping wider cultural understandings of Naples and in determining the terms of scholarly engagement with the city and its implications.

The field of critical theory interrogations of Naples is confined to two historical moments. The first wave comprises the writings of the Frankfurt-based philosopher-intellectuals who gathered in the Naples area between 1923 and 1927.[3] The corpus includes Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis' seminal essay, entitled 'Naples' (1924), which becomes the corner stone of the critical and cultural construction of Naples as 'porous'; it also includes Ernst Bloch's extension

[3] Beyond the strict parameters of critical theory addressed here, there exists a wider bibliography of critical reflections on diverse aspects of Neapolitan life and culture. Among the more notable contributions are Jean-Paul Sartre's (1974) characterization of Naples as an 'enormous carnivorous existence'; Maria Antonietta Macciocchi's (1973) acute reflections on the socio-political dynamics of the city in the early 1970s; and Pier Paolo Pasolini's (1976) exploration of Neapolitan character.

and critique of Benjamin and Lacis' theoretical frame in the essay, 'Italy and Porosity' (1926), and Alfred Sohn-Rethel's brief reflection, 'The Ideal of the Broken: On Neapolitan Technology' (1926). The second wave, instead, begins with the 'discovery' of Benjamin and Lacis' essay in Italy in the 1990s, and its entry into cultural consciousness as a key point of reference for a new body of critical work addressing Naples.[4] That body of work includes Venetian philosopher Massimo Cacciari's interview essay, 'Non potete massacrarmi Napoli', published in an edited volume on Naples entitled *La città porosa* [*The Porous City*] (1992), and a series of reflections by Naples-based cultural studies scholar Iain Chambers, which culminate in the substantial essay, 'Naples: A Porous Modernity', published in *Mediterranean Crossings* (2008).[5]

The development of critical interest in Naples in the 1990s is bound up with a series of socio-economic and political factors, as well as with distinct intellectual developments. Long seen as a synonym for urban dysfunction, Naples underwent a dramatic transformation in the 1990s, following the implementation of a radical program of reform on the part of the city's first directly elected mayor, Antonio Bassolino (1993-2001).[6] Although subsequent events would later call into question the validity of the 'Neapolitan Renaissance' moniker associated with the Bassolino administration, the dramatic regeneration of the historic center, the reinvigoration of civil society, and the notable reduction in bureaucratic inefficiency and corruption all served to rehabilitate the city's reputation and garner significant acclaim for Naples among urban

[4] Predating the 'discovery' noted here is a single article by philosopher Bruno Moroncini published in the Neapolitan edition of *L'Unità* newspaper in November 1982. See Demarco (2007, p. 66).
[5] Excluded from analysis is Serenella Iovino's (2016) engagement with Benjamin and Lacis' essay, on the grounds that its primary interest lies not in the essay's understanding of Naples but in the potential application of its theorization of porosity to the field of ecocriticism.
[6] Dines (2012, p. 7) writes that 'over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, Naples was seen to have reached its nadir and for many in Italy and abroad the city became a synonym for urban decay', while Santore (2010, pp. 262-63) reports that 'By the early 1990s, […] Naples was depicted as a city without laws or morals, a land of ungovernable people totally devoid of civic sense'.

regeneration scholars and urban theorists alike.[7] The positive profile of Naples at a time of national political crisis and amid a major reassessment of Italy's place in the geopolitical order following the fall of the Berlin Wall propelled the city to the forefront of debate about the future orientation of the country. No longer compelled by the ideological and economic conditions of the Cold War to orient itself exclusively northwards and westwards, Italy began to explore the potential of its Mediterranean position in the context of the changed geopolitical and globalized order.

In intellectual terms, critical interest in Naples in the 1990s was sparked by a broad renewal of scholarly attention to the work of Walter Benjamin and by the advent of new theoretical discourses and frameworks of notable relevance to the Naples and its theorization. One such framework emerging within Italy in the 1980s was that of *neomeridionalismo*, which constituted a revisionist approach to what had formerly been considered an undifferentiated Italian South, and which encouraged identification of the specificities, nuances and complexities of diverse southern realities.[8] The subsequent emergence of Mediterranean Studies, which gained particular traction in Italy following the publication of Predrag Matvejevic's *Breviario mediterraneo* (1987) [*Mediterranean: A Cultural Landscape* (1999)], provides another important framework. Premised upon the 'replacement of the concept of the nation with that of the transnational region as a category of imaginary and critical understanding' (Bouchard and Ferme 2013, p. 13), this theoretical frame implicitly invites a reconsideration of Naples's identity and potential beyond the confines of the Italian nation-state. At the same time, its critical

[7] On the Neapolitan Renaissance, see Demarco (2007); La Trecchia (2013); Marlow-Mann (2011, pp. 159-88); Dines (2012).

[8] *Neomeridionalismo* emerged from scholars clustered around the Istituto Merdionale di Storia e Scienze Sociale founded in 1985. It produced a new image of the South 'that underscored the region's economic vitality and re-examined anthropological formations, such as family networks and patron-client relationships, as sophisticated forms of social organizations rather than emblems of backwardness' (Bouchard and Ferme 2013, p. 6).

understanding of the Mediterranean as a region of uncertain borders, inscribed only to be erased and vanish, also shares much with the conceptual framework of 'porosity' advanced by Walter Benjamin and Asia Lacis in 1924 to encapsulate Naples and its cultural practices.[9] But perhaps more influential still is the resonance between Benjamin and Lacis's articulation of the concept of Neapolitan 'porosity' and the wider *Zeitgeist* of the 1990s, which combined postmodernism's celebration of hybridity with the collapse of the bipolar divisions of the Cold War.[10] Such is the contention of Victor Burgin who, in 1993, recognized in Benjamin and Lacis' theorization profound resonances with contemporary geopolitical changes:

> The generation of Europeans to which I belong grew up in a world of fixed borders, of glacial boundaries: frozen, it seemed for eternity, by the Cold War. Now, in the time of thaw, borders everywhere are melting, sliding, submerging, re-emerging. Identities – national, cultural, individual – are experiencing the exultant anxieties which accompany the threat of dissolution (1993, p. 43).

It is, then, as Burgin's 'exultant anxieties' encapsulates, a moment of intense uncertainty, coupled with a sense of great opportunity, that motivates the revival of critical theorization of Naples in the 1990s.

[9] Matvejević (1999, p. 10) writes of the Mediterranean: 'Its boundaries are drawn in neither space nor time. There is in fact no way of drawing them [...]. They are like a chalk circle that is constantly traced and erased, that the winds and the wave, that obligations and inspirations expand or reduce'.

[10] Cassano (cited in Fogu 2010) has credited postmodernism with making 'an important contribution in changing the way we look at the Mediterranean' but cautions that 'the exaltation of hybridity must not obscure the relations of force, a change in which remains decisive for facilitating a strong and stable encounter between cultures, peoples and individuals'. Fogu's work is a crucial point of reference for situating Cassano's theorization within the wider context of Mediterranean Studies in contemporary Italian thought.

Focusing explicitly on the critical concept of porosity and its evolution, this article traces the relationship between the theoretical corpus of the contemporary period and that of the 1920s. It interrogates the underlying premises of each individual theoretical construction of Neapolitan porosity and explores the implications of the same for our understanding of Naples. In accordance with the critical corpus' notable concern with the question of Naples' relative modernity, close attention is paid to the precise understanding of modernity invoked in each theoretical interrogation. Mindful, however, of the indivisible connection between vision and understanding, sight and insight, in the Greek term *theoria* (θεωρία), I argue that precisely how Naples' relationship with modernity is construed is intimately related to the perspective from which and the lens through which the city is viewed. Taking the cue from Franco Cassano's observation in relation to cartographical representation and geopolitical power that 'very few things are more powerful than gazes; very few things naturalize and neutralize hierarchies more than they do' (2000, p. xlv), I work to expose the implicit perspectival bias at work in each theoretical prism and to identify the implications for the understanding that emerges of Naples' position vis-à-vis modernity.[11] I highlight the historical dominance of the northern-centered approach to Naples, which pits Naples as other to 'a *certain* Europe [conceived] as the primary habitus of the modern' (Chakrabarty 2000, p. 43), explore the continuities between that approach and a range of relevant discourses, and assess the relative success of recent theoretical endeavors to resist the northern gaze and to approach Naples on its own terms. Ultimately, I call for a more cautious approach to critical and cultural engagement with the conceptualization of Neapolitan 'porosity'.

[11] Though unacknowledged, this formulation is clearly indebted to postcolonial critique from Said (1978) to the present. It also coincides with Sturken and Cartwright's more generalised Foucauldian articulation of the gaze as 'integral to systems of power and ideas about knowledge' (2009, p. 96).

Point of Departure: Benjamin and Lacis' Porous Naples

The inevitable starting point for the study of the role played by Naples in critical theory is the seminal 1924 essay, 'Naples', by German philosopher-critic Walter Benjamin and Latvian theatre director Asja Lacis. The essay centers around the articulation of porosity as the defining characteristic of Naples. Extrapolating from the permeability of the city's *tufo* stone to its architectural and urbanistic composition, Benjamin and Lacis extend the concept of porosity beyond the realms of the natural and built environments and project it onto the social fabric of the city, as well as onto the character and psychology of its inhabitants. The interpenetration of building and action, of private and public spaces, of festive and working time in Naples combine in Benjamin and Lacis' conceptualization to form an 'anarchical, embroiled village-like' center, characterized by a 'communal rhythm' and 'a theatre of new, unforeseen constellations' in which 'the stamp of the definitive is avoided' (1986, p. 166); as a result, porosity becomes 'the inexhaustible law of life in this city, reappearing everywhere' (1986, p. 168).

The essay celebrates Naples' challenge to categorical demarcations between inside and outside, private and communal, and revels in the productive possibilities that the blurring of such borders presents. Exemplary of the authors' appreciation of the city's porosity is the language of theatricality and resourcefulness deployed in describing the inhabitants' 'passion for improvisation' (Benjamin and Lacis 1986, p. 166) and in articulating the idea that 'balcony, courtyard, window, gateway, staircase, roof are at the same time stage and boxes' (Benjamin and Lacis 1986, p. 167). In this way, Naples becomes emblematic of a performative and ludic social sphere, which is explicitly contrasted with the rigid sobriety of northern Europe and implicitly

lauded for its elasticity, its alterity and its resistance to the homogenizing forms of the modern capitalist city.[12]

Contemporary scholars and urban theorists have readily embraced Benjamin and Lacis' theorization of porosity as well as their identification of Naples as the urban and cultural exemplification of the concept. For urban theorists, the positive valence of their articulation of Neapolitan porosity provides a positive model for urban renewal and for the re-evaluation of urban environments and practices that deviate from the European norm.[13] Scholars of Naples and Neapolitan culture, too, have readily adopted the language of porosity and applied it in their articulation, animation and explanation of diverse aspects of the city's history, form and cultural practices.[14] However, citations of Benjamin and Lacis' theorization tend to be highly selective and strategic; in deploying the concept of porosity without interrogating the critical premise on which it rests, and in neglecting to situate the essay in relation to the wider corpus of cultural and discursive representations of Naples, they overlook the ideological premises of the essay's claims and fail to take account of their effects.[15]

It is, for instance, rarely acknowledged that the celebratory and appreciative tones of Benjamin and Lacis' highly influential depiction of Naples are counterbalanced by a series of more negative characterizations of the city. They are also underpinned by a decidedly questionable discursive positioning which has been systematically – perhaps even willfully –

[12] Estelle Alma Maré has observed that the ludic quality of Benjamin and Lacis' description of Naples results in the depiction of 'a city scene in the "comic mode" for a stage setting, as described by Marcus Vitruvius Pollio'. Maré (2008), p. 204.
[13] See, for instance, Maré (2008) on Naples as a model for South Africa; on the consonance between Benjamin and Lacis' articulation of Naples as a porous city and its application to, respectively, Beirut and Rio de Janeiro, see Lahiji (2005) and Carvalho (2013).
[14] This is particularly true of scholars working in an Anglophone environment. See Dines (2012); Bruno (2002, pp. 361-99); La Trecchia (2013).
[15] Caygill (1988) and Gilloch (1997) are notable exceptions; their detailed close analysis exposes the ambiguities and limitations of the essay.

overlooked in much subsequent scholarship.[16] For, notwithstanding its status as a work of cultural criticism, Benjamin and Lacis' essay is, in the first instance, as its publication in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* might suggest, a piece of travel writing, the latest instalment in a long tradition of *Italienischen Reisen* which locates Naples as the site of cultural shock, and as the limit point of a cultural encounter between the civilized world and its barbaric other.[17] The 1924 essay is, therefore, ripe for reconsideration and re-reading in relation to the long history of travel literature dedicated to journeys in Italy and the tendency therein to construct not only Naples but Italy more generally as 'a place that resists modernity' (Hom 2015, p. 50). As will be demonstrated, Benjamin and Lacis' theorization of the city is premised upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between 'Naples' and 'Northern Europe' that may be seen to replicate that between East and West in Edward Said's theorization of Orientalism (or between Southern and Northern Europe in wider Mediterreanist discourse).[18] For scholars of Italian culture, however, Benjamin and Lacis' essay resonates more precisely with the motifs and discourses of post-Unification *meridionalismo* and its construction of Naples and the Italian south in opposition to northern Italy, within the frame of a moralizing discourse and as a problematic of national moral character.[19]

[16] Only Verdicchio (2007, p. 260) and Robinson (2014) have recognised the Orientalist underpinnings of the Naples essay; the latter, whoever, without appreciating how Orientalist discourse operates within the European context.
[17] As Moe outlines, in the eighteenth century, Naples came to be figured as a liminal zone, the last outpost of civilization going south and the point at which Europe ends and Africa begins. Depending on one's perspective, the journey to the end of Europe could end splendidly at Naples or, as Augustin Creuzé de Lesser famously put it, 'quite badly' (Moe 2002, p. 62). For a detailed history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travellers' accounts of Italy, see Moe (2002, pp. 37-81).
[18] On Mediterraneanism's relationship with the more recent discipline of Mediterranean studies, see Herzfeld (1984; 2005). Although there are clear intersections between the broad anthropological discourse of Mediterraneanism and the Italian discourse of *meridionalismo* (not least because they both originate in post-Unification Italy), the peculiarity of the position enjoyed by Naples in state-of-the-nation discourses underpins my insistence on the national inflection of *meridionalismo* as the primary point of reference, over and above a more general Mediterraneanism, throughout this essay.
[19] As Dickie (1999, p. 59) observes, Villari (1875) assumes the role of 'an authoritative dispenser of ethnic stereotypes and of moral exhortations to the nation'. Because Naples and the South are 'the paradigmatic theatre of a moralizing empirical knowledge', Villari's 'discourse of the moral invests an otherness in Naples that Italy can

The essay opens, in fact, with an anecdote detailing the moment in which a crowd haranguing a priest accused of indecent offences suddenly undergoes a 'theatrical reversal' (Caygill 1988, p. 121), falling to its knees before the priest as he rises to bless a passing wedding procession. The anecdote, which is the first in a series of distinct scenes, or *Denkbilder*, evoking the city and facilitating key critical insights, serves not only to illustrate the centrality of Catholic cult to Neapolitan culture – it is argued that Catholicism's 'very last foothold would perhaps not be Rome, but Naples' (Benjamin and Lacis 1986, p. 163) – but also to exemplify the characteristic instability and indeterminacy of form with which the essay is primarily concerned.[20] Gilloch writes:

> the spectacle of the priest which opens the essay may seem a rather trivial incident but it has both thematic and methodological significance. […] it reflects a number of substantive themes in this essay: the continual inversion of the sacred and profane, the power of Catholicism, and the public and carnivalistic form of Neapolitan life (1997, pp. 54-55).

The anecdote further serves as a springboard to exploration of the mechanisms of power concealed from view; Benjamin and Lacis' assertion that the 'rich barbarism' (1986, p. 163) and the moral excesses of the Neapolitan people are legitimated only by the accommodating Catholic practices of confession and penance swiftly gives way to discussion of the Church's secular equivalent, the criminal organization of the Camorra. The identification of the Camorra's

investigate and, by doing so, know and moralize itself' (Dickie 1999, pp. 62-63). The correspondence between the nineteenth-century *meridionalismo*'s approach to the Italian South and Orientalist discourse was first established by Schneider (1998).

[20] The term *Denkbild* is Benjamin's; it 'encodes a poetic form of condensed, epigrammatic writing in textual snapshots, flashing up as poignant mediations that typically fasten upon a seemingly peripheral detail or marginal topic, usually without a developed plot or a prescribed narrative agenda, yet charged with theoretical insight' (Richter 2007, p. 2).

usurpation of the role officially assigned to the police – 'it does not occur to an injured party to call the police if he is anxious to seek redress […] he approaches a *camorrista*' (Benjamin and Lacis 1986, p. 163) – and the declaration that the organization's members are 'dispersed over the city and the suburbs. That makes them dangerous' (Benjamin and Lacis 1986, p. 163) serve to construct the Camorra – no less than Catholicism – as 'a spectral form of porosity' (Caygill 1988, p.126) operating outside of the structures of the modern state. Thus, the opening paragraphs of the essay depict Naples as a violent, irrational, and enigmatic place, in which sacred and profane interpenetrate; they also alert the uninitiated traveler to the operation of concealed networks of power and the existence of unexpected dangers on the streets of Naples.

The porosity of relations between the Neapolitan people, Catholicism and the Camorra creates an unfamiliar, even alien model of civil society so that, we are told, 'the travelling citizen who gropes his way as far as Rome […] loses his nerve in Naples' (Benjamin and Lacis 1986, p. 164). Naples is thus produced from the outset as a point beyond the border of recognizable European modernity, defeating the Northern traveler who labors south into alien territory. Such, indeed, is the experience of the authors themselves; we are told that they had travelled to Naples for an international congress of philosophers which simply 'disintegrated without trace in the fiery haze of this city', the 'complaining guests […] instantly relieved of their money and identification papers' (Benjamin and Lacis 1986, p. 164). The philosophers, thus deprived of the administrative and monetary instruments of western modernity, are thrust back into an apparently anachronistic and irrational realm of aggressive and obfuscating heat, beyond the parameters of their known world. Their passing into uncharted territory is equated with that of the 'banal tourist' whom 'even Baedekker' – ultimate authority and paternalistic tutor in the

ways of the unknown – 'cannot propitiate' (Benjamin and Lacis 1986, p. 164).[21] Similarly challenging is the general appearance of the city, which they find overwhelmingly and unexpectedly grey, providing poor comparison with 'fantastic reports by travelers [which] have touched up the city' (Benjamin and Lacis 1986, p. 165).

Underpinning this more negative understanding of Naples is an unarticulated but perceptible construction of the city as elusive and deceptive, 'a kind of swindling capital' (Mehlman 1993, p. 37). First suggested at the very outset of the essay, in the allusion to the city's connection with Saint Alfonso de Liguori, 'who made the practice of the Catholic Church supple enough to accommodate the trade of the swindler and the whore' (Benjamin and Lacis 1986, p. 163), this construction is most forcefully pursued in the account of the flourishing market in fake artefacts from Pompeii. Here, we are told, 'everything that the foreigner desires, admires and pays for is "Pompeii". "Pompeii" makes the plaster imitation of the temple ruins, the lava necklace, and the louse-ridden person of the guide irresistible' (Benjamin and Lacis 1986, p. 165). Thus, the unwitting tourist is shown to fall prey to the deceptive cunning of the Neapolitan, whose every human action and exchange is shown to be motivated by economic gain.[22]

The construction of Naples as an alien environment unregulated by the disciplinary forces of familiar bureaucratic practices raises the question of the city's relationship with European

[21] The first German-language Baedekker guide to Italy appeared in 1861; the full three-volume series rapidly became the dominant textual lens through which German-speaking tourists experienced the country in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. See Hom (2015, pp. 42-47).

[22] Typical of the different ways in which Benjamin and Lacis' work speaks to orientalist and meridionalist discourses is the divergence between philosophical and Italianist readings of this section of the essay. For Benjaminian philosophers like Buck-Morss (1991, pp. 26-27), 'the routinization of swindle and the professionalization of begging are expressions of the specifically capitalist form of Naples' underdevelopment' and reflect 'an improvisatory culture released, and even nourished, by the city's rapid decay'. For Italianists like Hom (2015, pp. 16, 47-48), instead, the discourse of swindling must be understood in relation to familiar stereotypes in the body of travel literature addressing Italy and Italians. Particularly significant is the description of Naples as a 'paradise inhabited by devils' that, as Croce (1927) details, circulated throughout Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

modernity, understood in its regulatory administrative dimensions. In accordance with the role played by the city generically understood as the 'metaphor of the experience of the modern world' (Chambers 1994, p. 92), this aspect of Benjamin and Lacis' essay has attracted significant critical commentary among cultural theorists. For Gilloch, the essay unequivocally 'seeks to give voice to the anachronistic status of Naples, to express the confrontation between a modern sensibility and a pre-modern environment, to articulate what may be termed the "shock of the old"' (1997, p. 62).[23] Buck-Morss and Burgin, instead, couch their understanding of Naples in terms of belated development: Buck-Morss observes that 'the central image of "porosity" (suggested by Lacis) captures the sense that the structuring boundaries of modern capitalism – between public and private, labour and leisure, personal and communal, have not yet been established' (1991, p. 26) in Naples, while Burgin identifies that the significance of Naples for Benjamin (Lacis's authorial contribution is disregarded here, as so often in the critical corpus) is 'the survival of the pre-capitalist social forms, which had *not yet* succumbed to the modern segregation of life into public and private zones' (1993, p. 59).[24] That 'not yet' of Buck-Morss' and Burgin's understanding pre-empts Chakrabarty's (2000) postcolonial critique of the historicist frame and exposes the inherently teleological and positivist drive of Benjamin and Lacis' representation of Naples as 'a belated, imperfect, incomplete and not-yet North' (Bouchard and Ferme 2012, p. xii).[25]

[23] Caygill (1988, p. 124) observes that 'while the authorial voice throughout *Naples* seems detached, it is constantly being qualified, shocked and even silenced by its "object"'.

[24] Although the title page of the English-language translation of the 'Naples' essay referenced by many scholars gives equal authorial credit to Lacis, her name is frequently expunged from in-text citations. Recent scholarship contends that Benjamin's debt to Lacis' influence is substantial, especially with respect to the development of his critical approach and writing style. See Ingram (2002); McGill (2008).

[25] Chakrabarty (2000, p. 7) observes that European historicism 'posited historical time as a measure of the cultural distance […] that was assumed to exist between the West and the non-West' and that served to legitimize the 'civilizing' discourse of colonialism. Thus, 'Europe's acquisition of the adjective "modern" for itself is an integral part of the story of European imperialism' (Chakrabarty 2000, p. 43).

Central to such an understanding of Naples is the northern European perspective from which the city is viewed. Recurrent throughout Benjamin and Lacis' 1924 'Naples' essay are a series – or, in Edward Said's terms, a 'repertory' – of objectifying images and discourses familiar from European travelers' tales of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and even more so from post-Unification Italian *meridionalismo,* all of which approach the city from the North.[26] A pathological discourse underpins the articulation of Naples' poverty and misery as 'contagious' (Benjamin and Lacis 1978, p. 164) while a moralizing discourse characterizes the depiction of the city's inhabitants as indolent, barbaric, deceitful, and prone to both 'the demon of profligacy' (Benjamin and Lacis 1986, p. 172) and indecent public displays of sexual activity. More prominent still is the northern European equivalent of the Orientalizing discourse that accompanies the essay's frequent recourse to exoticizing and picturesque scenic description of the city's most impoverished inhabitants; e.g. 'even the most wretched pauper is sovereign in the dim, dual awareness of participating, in all his destitution, in one of the pictures of Neapolitan street life that will never return' (Benjamin and Lacis 1986, p. 167).[27] Furthermore, throughout the essay, Neapolitan practices are either overtly or implicitly contrasted with those of an undifferentiated northern European social order – e.g., 'this sleep, which men and women also snatch in shady corners, is therefore not the protected Northern sleep' (Benjamin and Lacis 1986, p. 172), and, 'to exist for the Northern European the most private of affairs is here, as in the kraal, a collective matter' (Benjamin and Lacis 1986, p. 171). The comparison of social relations

[26] The lack of a Southern approach to Naples in post-unification Italy corresponds in contemporary global terms to what Cassano (2000, p. liii) has articulated as the 'feebleness of the voice of the South'.

[27] Moe's observation that the vision of Italy that emerges in the mid-eighteenth century 'alternates between denunciations of backwardness and exaltations of picturesqueness' (2012, p. 17) serves to remind us of the complementary relationship between discourse of backwardness and picturesque modes of representation. On the reinterpretation of the South as the region of the picturesque in post-Unification Italy, see Moe (2012, pp. 196-7); on the relationship between the picturesque and 'the South's anomalous position between Italy and the Orient, between the world of civilized progress and the spheres of either rusticity or barbarism', see Dickie (1999, p. 94).

in Naples to the life of the South African *kraal*, combined with the characterization of the city center as 'anarchical, embroiled, village-like' and exuding a 'communal rhythm' (Benjamin and Lacis 1986, p. 166), ultimately serves to construct Naples as what Said would term 'the ideal Other' of the northern European imaginary.

Implicit in Benjamin and Lacis' theorization of Naples, then, is an ontological and epistemological distinction between 'Naples' and 'Northern Europe' that may be seen to replicate that between East and West in Said's theorization. The binary structure associated with what we might term the Northern/Orientalist approach pits an exoticized, irrational, and primitive Other – the city of Naples – against a centered, rational, and civilized Northern Europe, with the tension between the two hinging on the relative perceived modernity of each. Additionally, although explicit feminization of Naples – a recurrent trope in cultural production and a feature of post-Unification racial theory – is avoided in Benjamin and Lacis' essay, the continuities between the feminine and the Orient operating within Orientalism may also be detected in Benjamin and Lacis' approach; while Burgin (1993, p. 43) recognizes in the 1924 essay allusions to 'the pre-Oedipal, maternal, space: the space, perhaps, that Benjamin and Lacis momentarily refound in Naples', the feminization of Naples will resurface more explicitly in contemporary critical theory in the work of Chambers (2008).[28] Finally, just as with Orientalism, so too with the Northern/Orientalist equivalent, the potency of the discourse derives from its power to control the very object it speaks about through the production of a regime of truth that is embedded in existing power dynamics.[29]

[28] The feminization of Naples in the Italian cultural imaginary derives from the legend of the city's foundation on the site where the siren Parthenope drowned herself after failing to bewitch Ulysses with her song. The racial feminization of Naples emerges with Alfredo Niceforo's (1898) distinction between the female people of Naples, characterized as 'dissolute and weak by nature', and the male people of Northern Italy, equipped with 'collective consciousness […], social organization, institutions and discipline' (Gribaudi 1996, p. 77).

[29] Those same power dynamics are replicated extratextually in the habitual erasure of Lacis' authorial contribution in the scholarly literature.

In the final analysis, then, Benjamin and Lacis' essay is less interested in understanding Naples and its culture on its own terms than it is in interpreting the city through a pre-existent set of assumptions – an imagined moral geography – that reveals at least as much about the Northern European perspective as agent of analysis as it does about Naples as object of analysis.[30] For that reason, I would argue, the critical concept of porosity advanced by Benjamin and Lacis should be re-evaluated not as a quality inherent to the city of Naples *per se* – as it has been received and deployed in critical and cultural circles – but as the product of a Northern European gaze and of the encounter between a Northern European sensibility and its Southern Other at a precise historical moment.[31] In the following sections of this essay, I set up a dialogue between that historical moment and the contemporary return to the critical concept of porosity, shifting between the writings of the 1920s and those of the contemporary context to better elucidate the relationship between the two and the implications for our understanding of Naples.

The Northern Gaze Reloaded: Massimo Cacciari's Postmodern Porosity

The Italian 'discovery' of the critical theorization of Neapolitan porosity in the early 1990s can be traced back to the publication in 1992 of *La città porosa: Conversazioni su Napoli* / *The Porous City: Conversations on Naples*, a collection of interview-essays on Naples edited by journalist Claudio Verardi, in response to the adverse fortunes and image of the city in the early 1990s.[32] The volume takes its title from the argument advanced by Venetian philosopher and architectural theorist, Massimo Cacciari, whose reflections on Naples dialogue closely with

[30] On the northern roots and the history of Italian moral geographies, see Moe (2002, esp. pp. 112-20).
[31] The centrality of perspective and the contingency of Benjamin and Lacis' theorization of Naples is acknowledged by Iovino (2016, p. 16) through her choice of phrasing: 'in their Mitteleuropean eyes […] the city looked porous'.
[32] The other contributors to the book are architect, Francesco Venezia; theatre and film director, Mario Martone; industrialist, Antonio D'Amato; and writer, Gustaw Herling.

Benjamin and Lacis' essay but re-evaluate the city of Naples and the concept of porosity in the light of contemporary conditions in post-Cold War Europe.[33] For Cacciari, the symbolic significance of Naples is twofold. On the one hand, Cacciari sees in the city's dynamic and socially diverse urban reality a model for high-density urban living in the contemporary age. On the other, he sees in its status as a 'threshold city' (1992, p. 162), perched on the frontier between Europe and the non-European Mediterranean, the potential for Naples to serve as a model for the Mediterranean reorientation of post-Cold War Europe.

Cacciari's theorization of Naples retains both the Northern gaze on the city and the North-South binary of Benjamin and Lacis' essay. Although it also shares Benjamin and Lacis' polarization of the relative modernity of Naples and an undifferentiated Northern Europe, it departs from the 1924 essay in its inversion of the coordinates of Benjamin and Lacis' moral geography. The Northern European, 'Franco-German' or 'Carolingian' city is negatively and even pathologically marked in Cacciari's understanding, where it becomes emblematic of 'a "cold", maimed Europe, which is incapable of serving as a bridge, of relating, of conceiving of openness in relation to others' (1992, p. 161).[34] Moreover, Cacciari criticizes 'the great Enlightenment, Jacobin, Marxist tradition' of European political thought for its elimination of 'that ludic component of play which is an essential component of every social relationship' (1992, p. 165).

In opposition to this joyless, aloof and maimed model of Europeanness, Naples represents for Cacciari the exemplification of a distinct mode of European modernity centered on the Mediterranean. No longer the 'ideal Other' of the northern European imaginary as in Benjamin

[33] Cacciari's 'discovery' coincides with the broad revival of interest in the work of Walter Benjamin among philosophers, cultural geographers and urban theorists at this time, but also with the run-up to the first direct mayoral elections in Italy. These would see Cacciari assume power in Venice alongside Bassolino in Naples.
[34] All translations from the Italian original are my own.

and Lacis' work, Naples is celebrated by Cacciari for its embodiment of Mediterranean Europe and its status as a bridge to the 'Mediterranean ecumene' (1992, p. 161). Along with Palermo, it becomes emblematic of all important Mediterranean cities, whose significance lies in their ripeness for re-evaluation in the context of post-Cold War Europe; they 'must be reinvented and reconsidered, as large cultural, political and social centers, in contact with the Mediterranean ecumene but always as integral parts of Europe' (1992, p. 161). Central to that re-evaluation is a reconsideration of the relationship between Naples as Mediterranean city and European modernity. For Cacciari,

> the porous city is one in which nothing advances according to neat lines, ruptures. This is the extraordinary modernity of these Mediterranean cities, which many foolish 'modernists' see instead as their backward character. […] The form of these cities is never developed in accordance with planning, program, *a priori*. […] the Mediterranean city is characterized by play, by openness, too, on other planes (1992, pp. 162-63).

The value of the 'Mediterranean city' exemplified by Naples, then, is its openness, its ludic quality, and its rejection of an overly structured and restrictive northern European model, all of which – understood in 1924 as evidence of an ambiguously celebrated deficit of modernity – is reimagined in 1992 as the essence of the city's modernity or, perhaps more accurately, its postmodernity.[35]

[35] Cacciari's theorization of Naples reflects positions outlined in dispersed essays on the relationship between philosophical thought, architecture and modernity; the more significant essays are collated in the English-language volume *Architecture after Nihilism* (1993).

Cacciari's construction of Naples as a distinctly Mediterranean city, representative of a positive, postmodern mode of Europeanness, might be considered a first attempt to provide a distinctly Mediterranean perspective on Naples and its relationship with Italy and Europe.[36] The essay engages closely with Benjamin and Lacis' theorization of the city but departs from it in its conscious expansion of the scope and terms of Neapolitan porosity. For where the 1924 essay produces Naples as the site and container of porosity – in Benjamin and Lacis' understanding, porosity is restricted to rhythms, practices and interactions that take place *within* the city of Naples – Cacciari's production of Naples as a 'threshold-city', at the same time 'the last European city and the first Mediterranean city' (1992, p. 162), clearly extends the reach of porosity beyond the confines of what we might term the 'theatre-city' imagined by Benjamin and Lacis. Porosity is now also seen to characterize Naples' interactions with the wider world, as the city is reimagined by Cacciari as a 'colossal, great sponge, spread out on the sea' (1992, p. 164), absorbing and feeding off all it encounters.

Despite the essay's endorsement of Naples and the Mediterranean mode of Europeaness it exemplifies, there remains a significant point of tension, of contradiction, in Cacciari's theorization, which limits the success of his efforts to fully invert the moral geographies and the relative value attached to Naples and Northern Europe in Benjamin and Lacis' work. On the one hand, Cacciari applauds the fact that Naples is a city 'that doesn't confront its problems through macro-projects, on the basis of a logocentric *ratio*; that doesn't reduce the complex of tensions and conflicts; that doesn't tend to annul them but rather, to assimilate and, almost, feed off them'

[36] In subsequent works published during the 1990s, Cacciari would further develop this Mediterranean-centred approach and put the concept of the Mediterranean *polis* at the heart of his new, political 'geophilosophy' of Europe. Given the attention paid therein to the centrality of unstable borders and the tensions between dualities inherent in European thought and practice, it is to be lamented that Cacciari does not return to Naples in these works. See *Geofilosofia dell'Europea* [*Geophilosophy of Europe*] (1994) and *Arcipelago* [*Archipelago*] (1997).

(1992, p. 164). On the other, however, despite asserting that there is reason for hope, Cacciari observes that the current state of the city – which is one of extreme dysfunction in the period in which he is writing – is 'semi-desperate', and he cautions that the great challenge facing Naples is to 'combine its southern "porosity" with the characteristics proper to the Rule of Law, to European reason' (1992, p. 163). The articulation of this concern, which is reiterated a second time as the conversation shifts towards the city's problems with political corruption and organized crime, betrays a sense that the rule of law and the European cult of reason are implicitly antithetical, even inimical, to Naples in its embodiment of the 'European-Mediterranean city'. At this juncture, Cacciari reverts to the moralizing language of post-Unification *meridionalismo* and to the repertoire of familiar stereotypes associated with Naples; the city now comes to be construed not as a positive model of urban life and collective interaction but as a 'land of extremes' (1992, p. 188), in the grip of 'a conflict between tyranny and *civitas*' (1992, p. 187) and under siege by 'a politico-criminal organization that would like to subjugate the entire city' (1992, p. 188).[37] Thus, notwithstanding its stated appreciation for Naples' open, mobile and ludic modernity and its endorsement of Naples as the 'city-symbol' of a celebrated and distinctly Mediterranean form of Europeanness, Cacciari's essay ultimately retains a Northern-centric moral geography. Failing to invert them, the final section of the essay effectively reinforces the moral and symbolic coordinates traditionally ascribed to Naples'

[37] Though a prevalent trope throughout post-Unification *meridionalismo* (see Niceforo 1898; Villari 1875), the negative construction of the Italian South as a cursed land waiting to be rescued from tyranny has been traced to the aftermath of the failed 1848 Revolution in Naples and Sicily (Petrusewicz 1998). Cacciari's recourse to the historical trope is highly problematic, as is his rose-tinted presentation of the predecessors of the contemporary Camorra as a more benign entity that 'was part of the Neapolitan community, and had an ethical dimension' (Cacciari 1992, p. 173). As the 1901 Saredo report made clear, the coexistence of a low-level, intimidatory Camorra with an organised Camorra operating at the highest commercial and political levels, both extremely damaging to wider Neapolitan society, long predates the current reality. See Sales (1988).

relationship with a Northern Europe implicitly characterized throughout as 'the primary habitus of the modern' (Chakrabarty 2000, p. 43).

The Road Not Taken: Ernst Bloch's Southern Alternative

Cacciari's failure to shake off the Northern-centric understanding of Naples was not, as Said has claimed of Orientalism, inevitable.[38] Already in 1926, in an essay entitled 'Italy and Porosity', Ernst Bloch provided insightful critique of Benjamin and Lacis' theorization and its underlying premise. Borrowing the key concepts of the essay and deploying them '*tema con variazione*' (Ujma 2001), Bloch too extended the scope of Benjamin and Lacis' theorization of porosity, not by applying it to Naples' interactions with the wider world, as Cacciari would do, but by extrapolating from Naples to Italy as a whole, with the bold but inaccurate assertion that 'Walter Benjamin has described Italy as "porous"' (1988, p. 451). The ready elision of Asja Lacis' authorship and of the border between Naples and Italy in Bloch's formulation speaks in different ways to established gender hierarchies and to conventional constructions of Naples and Italy deriving from the repertoire of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writings by foreign observers. For just as Benjamin and Lacis' essay may be seen to follow in the wake of the historical repertoire that pits Naples and the Italian South beyond the European norm, Bloch's essay may be aligned with the body of work that constructs Italy as a whole as distinct from the cultural core of Europe and as the 'key point of reference against which intellectuals and travellers measured the superiority and modernity of their own countries' (Moe 2002, p. 16).[39]

[38] In a documentary interview with Sut Jhally (1998), Said asserted of Orientalism that 'to think past it, to go beyond it, is virtually impossible, because there is no knowledge that isn't codified in this way'. Though reductive, this statement has circulated widely.

[39] The key points of reference for the construction of Italy as Europe's South are Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) and Mme de Stael's *Corinne, or Italy* (1807). See Moe, 2002, pp. 13-27.

Following in the vein of that latter body of writing, Bloch proceeds to argue that all aspects of Italian life – its wines, its language, the décor of its houses, the rhythms of its daily life, its art, theatre and opera – might be characterized as porous, in the terms outlined by Benjamin and Lacis. Similarly, he portrays the coexistence of the archaic and the modern – identified by Benjamin and Lacis as inherent to Naples' urban fabric and culture – as typical of Italian culture *tout court*: 'If in southern Italy, this late, non-classical, Orient-saturated culture of the Mediterranean can be felt most intensely, along the way it has flooded the art and people of Italy as a whole' (Bloch 1988, p. 455). In this way, the distinctiveness afforded Naples in Benjamin and Lacis's work – where 'Naples appears an island, a separate, disconnected entity' (Gilloch 1997, pp. 62-63) – is supplanted by a conceptualization of Naples as an intensification of but contiguous with Italian culture as a whole.[40]

However, although 'Italy and Porosity' retains the North-South binary that structures Naples' relationship with Northern Europe in Benjamin and Lacis' work, it too – like Cacciari's 'Non potete massacrarmi Napoli!' – inverts the co-ordinates of the moral geographies ascribed to the two contexts in 1924, favorably contrasting cultural practices and social interactions in Naples (as emblematic of Italian culture) with those witnessed in Germany:

> To see a party of Neapolitans enter a restaurant and spread out over the tables, even the already partly occupied ones, and to observe the initiation of social contact and the mingling of conversations, is a true lesson in porosity. There is nothing aggressive in this,

[40] Gilloch (1997) attributes this construction of Naples as an island to Benjamin and Lacis' use of the formal technique of the *Denkbild*, which inhibits sustained engagement with the socio-economic and political forces at work in the wider context.

> nothing like the German practice of confiscation; rather, everything is friendly and open: a diffuse, collective mode of gliding (Bloch 1988, p. 451).

Where Bloch intervenes most presciently – but to the disregard of later theorists – is in his identification that cultural constructions of Italy's supposed alterity are entirely dependent upon the perspective from which the country is viewed. Although the point is made with exclusive reference to German literature and travel writing (he cites Goethe and Baedeker), it holds true for Western cultural discourse more generally. The essay opens with the phrase, 'One travels to this country mostly in the wrong way' (Bloch 1988, p. 450), and later proceeds to assert that 'Far too few travel to Italy from the South, unfurling the map starting from Palermo, or even better from Tunis and its souks: here, the facile and wholly subjective contrast to the North's lack of form is left behind' (Bloch 1988, p. 455). Inherent in this understanding of the contrast between North and South as *wholly subjective* is a tacit critique of the Northern/Orientalist premise of Benjamin and Lacis' work, which has been disavowed in the adoption and redeployment of the concept of porosity in the 1990s, in cultural analyses of Naples and in the wider body of work by critical and urban theorists.

The failure of contemporary critical theorists to engage with Bloch's critique of Benjamin and Lacis' approach to and characterization of Naples begs a series of related questions. Of the field of critical theory in general, we might ask whether such apparent critical laziness is in fact the product of an acritical regard for the work of Walter Benjamin (the same that also underpins the erasure of Asia Lacis' authorial contribution) or a consequence of the sheer appeal of the essay's articulation of porosity, over and above any possible objections about its underlying

tenets.[41] Of critical theory in Italy more specifically, we might also ask how scholarly disregard for Bloch's perceptive critique relates to the history of *meridionalismo* and of associated discourses that construct Naples as other to 'national' Italian culture. While the answer to the former lies in the realms of speculation, the answer to the latter surely lies in the history of nineteenth-century Italian nationalism's efforts to 'vindicate the nation's dignity' and counter a widespread understanding of Italy as politically, culturally and economically backward.[42] The emergence of *meridionalismo* as a discourse designed to deflect connotations of backwardness away from the heart of the emergent nation-state and thereby establish Italy's credentials as a modern European entity may be seen to cast a long shadow over the failure of contemporary theorists' disregard for Bloch's work. An important consequence is that the contemporary disavowal of Bloch's understanding of porosity as an Italian – as well as Neapolitan – characteristic serves to perpetuate the construction of Naples as an exceptional entity, a place apart and unrelated to national cultural phenomena.

Iain Chambers' View from the South: Naples' Porous Modernity

In the absence of scholarly engagement with Bloch's critique of Benjamin and Lacis' work, it is only with Iain Chambers' substantial essay on Naples in *Mediterranean Crossings* (2008) that the pre-eminence of the Northern view of Naples in critical theory comes to be challenged, though not entirely displaced. The essay – an elusive and suggestive piece of work indebted to the school of urban cultural criticism represented by Walter Benjamin, Henri Lefebvre and

[41] I am not the first to question the extent to which Walter Benjamin's status may be seen to underpin the acritical reception of the notion of Neapolitan porosity; Pasquale Verdicchio (2007, p. 260) raises in passing but rather more categorically the possibility that "the philosopher's reputation has led to the qualifier 'porous' being accepted uncritically".

[42] Romeo cited in Moe (2002, p. 21).

Michel De Certeau – both extends and departs from earlier and more dispersive reflections on Naples in *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (1994) and *Culture after Humanism* (2001). In accordance with Chambers' standing as the pioneer of cultural studies and postcolonial studies in Italy and as its title, 'Naples: A Porous Modernity', would suggest, the 2008 essay seeks to reconcile Benjamin and Lacis' articulation of Neapolitan porosity with an appreciation of the city's modernity, understood now in the light of postcolonial theory. The legacy of Benjamin and Lacis' approach to Naples is evident not only in Chambers' adoption, extension and reworking of their theorization of Neapolitan porosity but also in his construction of the city in accordance with a series of *Denkbilder*. The essay is made up of eleven distinct sections, each structured around a distinct image, scene or facet of Neapolitan life that serves as a springboard for theoretical reflection; it thus replicates the anecdotal and episodic structure of Benjamin and Lacis's approach and exemplifies its own articulation of Naples as a multifaceted city that cannot be reduced to a unitary understanding.[43]

Chambers' postcolonial understanding of Naples' modernity and its innovative stance with respect to Cacciari's 1992 essay are indebted to the publication in 1996 of Franco Cassano's *Il pensiero meridiano* (1996) [*Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean* (2000)].[44] In setting out his seminal critique of discourses relating to the Italian South and in elaborating the distinct system of 'Southern Thought', Cassano observes that the history of discourses relating to the Italian South and its relationship with modernity is a history of discourses from the North, aligned exclusively with Northern European intellectual culture.

[43] Chambers (2008, p. 74) writes that 'to be open to […] the collective narration of identities and the exchange of memories that pass under the name "Napoli", is clearly to abandon the possibility of conducting all these threads into a single conduit, a unique narrative able to explain such details'.
[44] The English edition, in addition to providing an edited and annotated translation of the original, also includes four essays published in Italian between 1996 and 2000.

Drawing on postcolonial and subaltern studies, especially Dipesh Chakrabarty's mission to 'provincializ[e] the dominant symbolic universe and neutraliz[e] its claim to centrality and uniqueness' (Chakrabarty 2000, p. xxxvi), Cassano moves to facilitate the emergence of an autonomous Southern understanding through the development of a critical perspective on modernity that amounts to a view from the South.[45]

Cassano's critique of the existing framework centers on the subversion of the hierarchy implicit in the Northern history of the Italian South. In arguing of the South that

> we must stop [*seeing*] its pathologies as the consequence of a deficiency of modernity. We must *reverse our point of view* and being to think that in the South of Italy, with all probability, modernity is not extraneous to the pathologies that, even today, some think it should cure (Cassano 2012, p. 1),

Cassano highlights the centrality of perspective to critical understandings of the Italian South.[46] Although the allusion to pathologies might appear to be inflected with residues of the same bias witnessed elsewhere in the corpus on Naples, the explicit manner in which they are confronted challenges us to rethink those pathologies not as antithetical to modernity – the product of a deficit of modernity locatable in the Italian South as the Northern/Orientalist view would have it – but as inherent to and a product of modernity itself. Indeed, rather than pitting the South against the North at polar opposites of the spectrum of modernity, or simply inverting the values

[45] See Bouchard and Ferme in Cassano (2000, p. xiv) for further discussion of the relationship between Cassano's theorization of the Italian South and the interpretative contexts of postcolonial and subaltern studies.
[46] My italics. Bouchard and Ferme's English translation replaces the Italian verb 'vedere' [seeing] with 'thinking of'; in so doing, it downplays the Italian original's insistence on the centrality of the gaze to knowledge and power but also exemplifies the intimate connection between seeing and understanding inherent in the Greek word 'theoria'.

attached to north and south in their relationship with modernity as Cacciari's theory does, Cassano's Southern Thought throws off the shackles of binary thinking to argue that both modalities are equally products of modernity.[47]

Cassano's theorization embraces and speaks to several critical discourses at once. His assertion that 'in the case of the South, symbolic subjection passes […] through its definition as a space of backwardness and underdevelopment, as an unfinished version of the North' (2000, p. xxxix) both acknowledges the long history of the Northern, meridionalist view of the South and, at the same time, resonates with Chakrabarty's critique of historicism 'as a measure of the cultural distance […] that was assumed to exist between the West and non-West' (Chakrabarty 2000, p. 7). As Bouchard and Ferme identify, Cassano's response reframes the argument so that the 'the South is no longer a belated, imperfect, incomplete and not-yet North, but the space of a differential, autonomous identity to be recovered and rediscovered' (Cassano 2000, p. xii); it is, simultaneously, 'a critical resource to question the real achievements of Western modernization while probing the system of values that legitimized it' (Bouchard and Ferme in Cassano 2000, p. xiii).

The influence of Cassano's critique of what we might term 'Northern Thought' is what distinguishes 'Naples: A Porous Modernity' from Chambers' earlier writings on Naples. Although not credited expressly in the essay, the debt to Cassano is acknowledged in the introductory chapter to *Mediterranean Crossings* (2008). Here, Chambers cites Cassano's mission 'not to think of the south in the light of modernity, but rather to think of modernity in the

[47] This interpretation departs from that of Bouchard and Ferme who view Cassano's rethinking of the South as 'seek[ing] nothing less than the reversal of the North-South relationship' (Cassano 2000, p. xii). Although Cassano himself deploys the language of reversal on more than one occasion, his understanding of the South's relationship with modernity transcends the binary mode implied in the language of 'reversal'. See also Bouchard and Ferme (2013, p. 78).

light of the south' in support of his own position that 'a North viewed from the South of the world represents not a simple overturning but, rather, a revaluation of the terms employed and the distinctions that have historically constructed the contrasts and complexities of this space' (Cassano 1996, p. 3; Chambers 2008, p. 34).

But what might the call for overturning the Northern view mean for Chambers' critical approach to and understandings of Naples? At first glance, the answer is far from obvious. The early sections of Chambers' essay reprise sections of his earlier writings on Naples; they follow firmly in the wake of the German theorists of the 1920s and appear therefore to embrace rather than to subvert the 'Northern Thought' encapsulated therein. In the section entitled 'Critical City', for instance, Chambers twice endorses Benjamin and Lacis' theoretical construction of Neapolitan porosity without questioning its ideological underpinnings. In the first instance, he quotes a passage from *Culture after Humanism*, in which he asserts in relation to Naples that 'the crumbling *tufo*, child of the violent marriage between volcano and sea, child and water, is symptomatic of the unstable edifice that is the city' (2008, p. 81; 2001, p. 129). In the second instance, he suggests that

> the idea of porosity can be extended to include [Naples'] historical and cultural formation. Porous matter absorbs whatever it encounters; it soaks up external elements while maintaining its initial form. It embodies and incorporates foreign elements and external pressures. The history of Naples is also, and perhaps most significantly, the history of such processes (Chambers 2008, p. 81).

Chambers, then, like Cacciari before him, extends the concept of porosity beyond the scope and terms of Benjamin and Lacis' theorization, so that the city's historical and cultural formation – the elements that make up its very identity – are viewed and understood through the prism and process of porosity. However, unlike Cacciari, Chambers does not limit his engagement with the earlier corpus of critical theory representations of Naples to the work of Benjamin and Lacis alone. He also cites and implicitly lends credence to Alfred Sohn-Rethel's (1926) psychogeographical understanding of the relationship between the city's proximity to Vesuvius, its vulnerability to the threat of catastrophe, and the consequent 'piecemeal' diffusion of technical and economic development in Naples (Chambers 2008, p. 79).[48]

Beyond the precise co-ordinates of critical corpus, however, the early stages of 'Naples: A Porous Modernity' also reiterate a series of familiar discourses and stereotypes associated with the Northern view on Naples – the city is presented as self-absorbed; as moribund, 'a defunct center, a victim of history, and a corpse' (Chambers 2008, p. 76); and as anachronistic, 'a survivor from an "antique, pre-Christian world, that has remained intact on the surfaces of modernity"' (Chambers 2008, p. 72). In its general absorption and replication of such discourses without further categorization or clarification, 'Naples: A Porous Modernity' both epitomizes the concept of porosity and presents a *summa* of cultural and critical representations of Naples in Northern Thought.[49]

Emblematic of the Northern/Orientalist view of Naples is the fact that the primary frame through which the city is constructed is as an elusive, even incomprehensible, place, beyond the

[48] Here Chambers reprises his epithetic citation of Sohn-Rethel in 'Cities without Maps' (Chambers 1994, 104).
[49] Also contributing to the status of the text as *summa* is the series of epithets (by Walter Benjamin, John Horner Burns, Predrag Matvejevic, Ermanno Rea, Giuseppe Montesano, Friedrich Nietzsche and Neal Ascheron) that introduce early sections of the essay; the device exemplifies the wealth and complexity of cultural representations of Naples while also highlighting the essay's embeddedness within a dense network of historical and cultural allusion.

grasp of rational thought. The opening section, 'Under Vesuvius', reiterates almost verbatim a passage from *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*: 'With its violent mixture of antiquated street rites and global-design capitalism, Naples confronts us like a riddle. Its sphinx-like qualities, reflecting back what we hope, and fear, to see, disclose an unstable hubris dissected by different cultures and historical rhythms' (Chambers 2008, p. 73). The orientalist and, for the first time, *overtly* feminized connotations of the sphinx, the allusion to psychological dynamics of desire and fear, and the articulation of the city's instability and hybridity all serve to depict Naples as Other to the presumed rationality of a normative model of urban development. That intimation of Naples' alterity is bolstered by the personification of the city elsewhere in the essay as a neurotic, self-absorbed and narcissistic subject, 'repeatedly referring to itself, offering up the scene of endless analysis' (Chambers 2008, p. 84); it is further supported by allusion to the noisy 'pre-linguistic economy' represented by what Tomasi di Lampedusa articulated as the 'incessant shouting of that paranoid city' (Chambers 2008, p. 85).[50]

However, there emerges alongside the Northern/Orientalist depiction of Neapolitan alterity a consideration of the city's relationship with modernity which gradually shifts the critical terms of engagement away from comparison with the normatively construed Northern European models of urban life and critical thought and towards an appreciation of Neapolitan difference on its own terms. Already in the opening section of the essay, the Northern-inflected language of 'uneven development' and 'backwardness' is countered by the suggestion that Naples 'proposes its own particular configuration of modern life' (Chambers 2008, p. 74), one in which conflicts and contradictions are laid bare instead of being masked behind the 'glass-and-steel facades of an official modernity that simply exorcises and confines to the "market" what it cannot absorb and

[50] The psychoanalytical references continue in the allusion to the city's 'architecture of introspection' (2008, p. 85) and to its being 'as though locked in what Jacques Lacan refers to as the mirror stage' (2008, p. 84).

manage' (Chambers 2008, p. 74). Chambers thus construes contemporary Naples as an unrecognized but more *honest* manifestation of modernity, which exposes and disrupts the 'modern myth of the rational organization of urban space, production, labor and profit' (2008, p. 73).

As the essay progresses, Naples' status as 'an "Oriental" city' (Chambers 2008, p. 83) and its similarities with 'other non-Occidental cities' (Chambers 2008, p. 86) – rather than being problematized – are readily embraced and, indeed, validated for their capacity to expose 'what elsewhere is invariably forgotten and overlooked' (Chambers 2008, p. 86). Moreover, Naples is seen to provide an explicit critique of Northern Thought and its investment in a particular understanding of modernity: Chambers – after Cassano – hypothesizes that, in 'refus[ing] the superficial optimism of those, invariably from more northern climes, who believe they are predestined for "progress" […] Naples […] perhaps reveals less about its own obvious shortcomings than about the limits and illusions of modernity itself' (2008, p. 87). Viewed through this prism, Naples comes to represent not the antithesis of modernity, nor the exemplar of arrested or delayed development, but a critical mirror on modernity itself.

The subversion of the inherited Northern gaze on and understanding of Naples goes hand in hand with a rejection of the assumed rationality and the logical categories on which Northern Thought is premised. Observing that what he has 'learned from living in Naples is that the explanatory frames of historiography, sociology and anthropology are clearly insufficient' to 'render the city explicit in an imposed coherence' (Chambers 2008, p. 92), Chambers exposes the inherent tension between the promise of intellectual modernity and the failure of human cognition to fully account for the experiential complexity of urban life. He moves to correct his earlier depiction of Naples as a sphinx, by clarifying:

> ‘this is not to suggest that the city therefore remains a mystery, a riddle beyond the frontier of understanding; rather it is to suggest that the city itself proposes a diverse sense of “understanding”, ‘one that requires us to supplement a taxonomic cartography with an “atlas of emotion”’ (2008, p. 92).[51]

In effecting a shift away from cartography and towards the field of emotional geographies, Chambers questions the relationship between cognitive and affective understanding, and invites us to (re)consider the balance between cognition and emotion in western culture. In a construction reminiscent of Michel De Certeau’s (2004) articulation of the distinction between cartographic or panoptic constructions of the city and experiential or practiced understandings of the city generated in the process of walking, he writes: ‘To understand, to take stock, to seek to possess and to register the perspiring skin and mutating body of the city is perhaps to appreciate that “sense” is both corporeal and temporal. It ultimately resides in the ambulatory body that contains and sustains the transport of our thought’ (Chambers 2008, p. 92).

The distinction drawn here between cognitive and experiential understanding, or between what Haraway (1985) would term ‘disembodied’ and ‘situated’ knowledges, leads Chambers to confront directly the question of his own subject position in relation to the object of his analysis.[52] He writes:

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[51] The term ‘atlas of emotion’ is borrowed from Bruno (2002). Bruno’s psychogeographical exploration of cultural life and her mapping of the connections between urban space, architecture, cinema and the body provides a similarly allusive and situated account of Naples to Chambers’ own.

[52] Though not cited here, Haraway’s distinction is invoked in *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*; there, Chambers (1994, p. 93) argues that ‘in the dissonance between what Donna Haraway calls “situated” and “disembodied knowledges”, the very location of theory is disturbed’.

> How should I write and view this city: as a travelogue, from the point of view of the stranger, or as an inhabitant? How to avoid the superficial eye and imposition of an external measure, fruit of an imperial formation? Whatever posture I adopt, I find myself within the long tradition of these questions and gestures. For this city is also my home. (2008, p. 93)

In posing the question of how he – a non-native for whom Naples has become 'home' – should approach and characterize the city, Chambers alerts us to the intimate connection between point of view, representation and cognition, and to the centrality of distinct perspectives in constructing and understanding the city in different traditions.[53]

It is perhaps no coincidence that it is at the precise point at which Naples is presented as 'home' that the affective and situated mode of understanding Naples is promoted over the cognitive, disembodied form of understanding, nor that exemplification of the former is provided by a keystone of Neapolitan Baroque culture. Entitled 'The Subverted Eye', the sixth and central section of the essay, though perhaps appearing to retreat from critical theory, constitutes in fact the end-point of the essay's theoretical trajectory. Its detailed contemplation of Caravaggio's ground-breaking painting, *Sette opere di Misericordia / Seven Works of Mercy* (1606), provides indirect commentary on Naples and the provisional mode of viewing and understanding that the city proposes.[54] Central to Chambers' appreciation of the painting are the dynamic quality of the

[53] Chambers' biographical inscription is an acknowledgement of the centrality of situation to knowledge. As stated in *Culture after Humanism*, 'our view and voices bear the imprint of different histories; they speak out of a particular place. So, whatever I have to say […] undoubtedly lies in my response to the ambiguous, even enigmatic context of where I work and live: the city of Naples' (Chambers 2001, p. 131).
[54] 'Writing the city is to be written by the city, suspended in a narration without pretence to finality' (Chambers 2008, p. 93).

composition, which evokes an 'uncertain sense of stability and certitude' (2008, p. 96) and a challenge to conventional ways of framing and seeing. He observes of the painting that:

> there is no simple or obvious center but, rather an agitated constellation of attention. The eye is not drawn in; it is drawn across the canvas in a series of trajectories that refuse to coalesce in a single point of unity. The bodies that populate this space […] propose a series of intersections that cut across the privileged perspective of the viewer's gaze. The viewer is de-centered, his or her centrality displaced. Instead of the eye travelling in the picture toward a hypothetical vanishing point, the pictures invade the eye: disturbing, deviating and dissecting its habitual line of vision' (Chambers 2008, p. 94).

It is in that disruption to the habitual process of perception that the value of Caravaggio's work resides. Upholding the painting's reification of 'the mutable point of view revealed by the body' and its capacity to thwart 'the fixed point of Cartesian rationalism' (Chambers 2008, p. 96), Chambers celebrates the capacity of Caravaggio's art to threaten 'the nobility of the gaze (*theoria*) by offering what was seen and felt rather than what reason composed and commanded' (2008, p. 96). Caravaggio's work, then, serves for Chambers as both metaphor and exemplification of the corporeal, affective and situated mode of understanding demanded by Naples and epitomizes the challenge the city poses to the rational, disembodied knowledge of Northern Thought.

A Strategic Gendering of Porosity?

If Chambers' work represents a first step towards a theorization of Naples that eludes the Northern gaze and is consonant with the critical tenets of Southern Thought, it is not without its own questionable implications. Just as Dominjianni (1996) fleetingly observed of Cassano's elaboration of Southern Thought, so too we might note of Chambers' theorization of Naples that it stands in relation to Northern Thought as difference feminism stands in relation to the patriarchal order. In the prologue to the English edition, *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean*, Cassano questioned Dominjianni's privileging of gender over and above all other forms of rebellion that counter symbolic power but acknowledged the general validity of her analogy:

> Just as female experience is not an inferior and imperfect form of its male counterpart, but rather a different perception of the world that critiques the false neutrality of male dominance, so the South does not simply constitute an imperfect and incomplete stage of development, but rather a different way of seeing that aims at protecting its own autonomy vis-à-vis the developed world while deconstructing its symbolic arrogance. (Cassano 2000, pp. xxxvii-xxxviii).

Cassano thus embraces Dominijanni's analogy and its representation of the relationship between North and South in his theoretical model. The gender analogy has its own drawbacks, however. It reduces the field of critical perspectives to a binary set of relations and risks essentializing the respective gendering of North and South, thereby further reinforcing conventionally associated characteristics. Yet it is that very conventional and Northern-centered understanding of the world that Southern Thought seeks to trouble.

Returning to Chambers' 'Naples, a Porous Modernity' with such considerations in mind, the essay may be seen to take for granted the gendering of modernity and its putative Northern opposite. Its validation of the Neapolitan urban experience and its celebration of the city's challenge to disembodied forms of understanding are riven through with the historical weight of constructions of Naples as a feminized city, positioned outside a normatively construed understanding of Northern European modernity. However, a more positive interpretation, in tune with Chambers' postcolonial approach to Naples, would see in his feminization of the city a form of strategic essentialism akin to that theorized by Spivak (1987).[55] Though formulated with the needs of subaltern identity groups in mind, the temporary acceptance of essentialist foundations for the purpose of achieving political ends inherent in Spivak's advocacy of strategic essentialism resonates with the political mission underpinning Southern Thought and Chambers' engagement with Benjamin and Lacis' theorization of Neapolitan porosity. By embracing and validating Neapolitan difference with respect to normative modernity, Chambers exposes the false neutrality and symbolic arrogance of Northern Thought, and thereby provincializes it. Viewed in that light, the feminization of Naples in Chambers' work may be seen to function as part of a wider undertaking to position the historically marginalized Naples at the center of discourse and thereby facilitate the emergence of a new appreciation of the city, its relationship with modernity and its place in the world.

Conclusion

[55] Although Spivak would later reject the term 'strategic essentialism', she did not disavow the strategy: 'as a phrase, I have given up on it. As to whether I have given up on it as a project, that is really a different idea' (Danius, Jonsson and Spivak 1997, p. 35).

The theorization of Neapolitan porosity, first articulated by Benjamin and Lacis, has sparked intense interest among critical theorists and generated a series of expansions and revisions that have reimagined Naples in different ways at distinct moments in time. From its first iteration in 1924, through Bloch's and Cacciari's respective extensions and reorientations, to Chambers' postcolonial interpretation, three features have remained remarkably central to the critical theorization of Neapolitan porosity: a binary understanding of the relationship between Naples and Northern Europe, a preoccupation with the city's relative modernity, and the dominance of what I have termed the 'Northern view'. Inherent in Benjamin and Lacis's theorization is a strong sense of Neapolitan difference, which manifests in the essay's celebration of social practices in Naples and the challenge they pose to the categorical demarcation of private and public spheres familiar to our northern European authors. But it also manifests in the imposition of an imagined moral geography, resulting in the construction of Naples as the 'ideal Other' of an undifferentiated northern Europe.

That construction resurfaces throughout the corpus of critical theory engagements with Naples. As we have seen, Massimo Cacciari's engagement with Benjamin and Lacis' work in the early 1990s seeks overtly to expand the scope of the original understanding of porosity, to invert the coordinates of the moral geography imposed in 1924, and to uphold Neapolitan social relations as a model for the Mediterranean reorientation of Europe in the aftermath of the Cold War. However, in reverting to the moralizing language of historical *meridionalismo* when addressing the problem of organized crime in the city, Cacciari undermines his own efforts to ascribe positive value to Naples and to transcend the ideological and moral implications of the Northern view of the city. In contrast, Ernst Bloch's more immediate response to Benjamin and Lacis' theorization, in 1926, eschews negative characterization but, like Cacciari's, extends the

understanding of porosity while retaining a binary distinction between the realm of porosity and an impervious Northern Europe. Though disregarded by subsequent scholarship, the most significant insight provided by Bloch is that the understanding of Naples emerging from Benjamin and Lacis' essay is wholly subjective and a product of the Northern view of the city posited therein. It is only with Chambers' postcolonial critique of Benjamin and Lacis' theorization that the Northern view of Naples comes to be challenged, if not entirely displaced. By directly confronting the implications of his own compromised subject position and by promoting the dynamic, decentering and destabilizing quality of Baroque art as a model for an alternative mode of understanding, Chambers effects a shift away from the binary system of 'Northern Thought' and its preoccupation with rational distinctions between opposites. In this way, the long-held view of Naples as the 'ideal Other' of Northern Europe is effectively displaced.

In taking a long view of critical theory engagement with Naples, and weaving back and forth between the critical corpus of the 1920s and that of the contemporary context, what I have also sought to highlight is the striking resilience of the repertoire of historical motifs, discourses and associations that characterize the Northern/Orientalist view of Naples and that construct the city as the ideal Other of the northern European imaginary. Though innovations have certainly occurred, they have tended to reorient the discursive construction of the epistemological and ontological distinction between Naples and Northern Europe, often in creative and productive ways, but they have rarely succeeded in displacing it. Indeed, the extent to which the Northern gaze is inscribed throughout the corpus – even in Chambers' work, albeit for the purposes of contestation – illustrates the seductive quality and potency of porosity as a critical and descriptive category. However, it also serves to question the extent to which the new

phenomenon of Southern Thought can be seen to exist autonomously, on its own terms, and not merely in response to the dominance of the hegemonic and pervasive frame of analysis that is Northern Thought. Finally, what close interrogation of the field of critical theorization of Naples ultimately demonstrates is the intimate connection between the gaze and understanding; only when we fully appreciate that *how* you see is what you get can we fully understand the need for a radically different perspective capable of propelling us beyond entrenched discursive paradigms and tropes and into the realms of vital new insights and understandings.

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